

smile like you mean it by Fluffifullness

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Summary:

Finally, Richie shrugs everyone off, Eddie included, and casts a sort of self-conscious glance around at them before settling again on Eddie.

“Thanks,” he says, and then, “so” – he draws the vowel out in a way that’s both reassuringly Richie-like and mild-to-moderately bizarre to hear coming out of Eddie’s own mouth – “this is fucking weird.”

“You’re telling me,” Eddie says in Richie’s voice.

(In which Richie doesn’t entirely manage to shake off the unpredictable effects of the Deadlights, resulting in him and Eddie switching bodies.)

smile like you mean it

Author's Note:

If you'd prefer to skip any rehashing of Eddie's death scene / a quick fix-it of that, that's understandable, and you can do so by skipping to the fourth little section of this fic, beginning with "Somehow, though, even peeling off the still-damp, clingy fabric of his jacket..." (Or you could just skip the third section!) There is also a later nightmare sequence that might qualify as *more* graphic, so do tread carefully regardless!

When Richie sees Eddie standing there in Jade of the Orient, the world doesn't suddenly slow down; it speeds up. There's not even a gradual orchestral swell beyond the distant crash of someone dropping something in the kitchen. No angelic chorus, no blinding flash of light.

One second, he's got a vague feeling of foreboding and he's trying to piece together why he's been feeling increasingly self-conscious about looking as un-put-together as he *always* does, and then he's fucking blindsided so fast and hard that everything in him rejects the immediate impulse to turn to stone on the spot.

Instead, his thoughts oh-so-helpfully skip straight to racing at least as fast as his heart, and he does what he's always done in situations like this. He switches to emergency annoy-everyone-in-the-room-as-much-as-possible autopilot, because if not thinking about it isn't an option, then not letting anyone *know* he's thinking about it – about *anything* – is the only acceptable alternative.

Richie shoots Ben and Bev a conspiratorial look but doesn't give them time to actually stop him from hitting the gong in front of them with enough force to loudly and instantly put an end to Mike, Bill and Eddie's quiet conversation.

It throws some energy into their little shindig, so really Richie thinks he should be able to count it as a win. All he has to do is keep that

energy going by being louder than his feelings.

It's easy because he's beginning to realize that he *missed* these assholes, all of them, and it's hard because he's missed Eddie more than anything. It feels so *right* to have Eddie's attention on him that he finds himself trying harder and harder to keep it there.

He zeroes in on the ring on Eddie's finger long before he works up the nerve – or the drunken confidence, more like – to ask him about it. The answer is just as painful as it is unsurprising. Lucky he's already drinking his feelings.

Nevertheless, at some point it becomes seamless and easy for them to slip into their old pattern – Eddie's exaggerated overreactions, Richie's willfully obnoxious teasing, then on to fast-paced conversation and laughter, and back again. The alcohol probably helps. It takes the edge off, anyway.

It does nothing, however, to distract Richie from the secret, guilty satisfaction he gets from arm-wrestling Eddie. It's probably – no, scratch that, it's *definitely* stupid, goading Eddie into it only to realize far too late that even a little testosterone-fueled hand-holding is more than his heart can take. Eddie's fingers are slenderer than his, but he's got a grip so strong it makes Richie's head spin maybe more than the alcohol.

Of course Eddie just *has* to make it worse with that fiercely joyful look he always used to get when he had the kind of fun Mrs. K never just *let* him have – when he was getting away with something, or felt like he was.

And then he says, “Let’s take off our shirts and kiss!” and the only thing that keeps Richie from immediately losing the match is his knee-jerk assumption that he can’t have heard right.

Then comes the guilt, of course, because if Eddie knew how much Richie would give for him to mean it, he’d never make jokes like that in the first place.

Being in Derry is hell on Richie's nerves. Memory lane would be a rough street for him even if walking down it *didn't* entail nightmare encounters with killer clowns and fleshy monsters hatching out of fortune cookies.

He almost leaves. He's not proud of it, but when was the last time he was really proud of anything, anyway? He's lived with plenty of guilt and shame for forty years and counting - might as well pile on a little more and *keep* counting. At least then he won't have to face the worst parts of himself in some dark fucking sewer and risk Eddie ever finding out.

But that's also why he stays, in the end; he could live with being the asshole who was too much of a coward to keep a promise, maybe, but he could never live with being the reason they all die trying to save this town that never gave *any* of them anything but heartache.

He owes Stan better. He owes all of them, and besides – when all's said and done, it'll hurt less to see Eddie off knowing for sure that he'll be okay. Maybe Richie will even get to keep being as much a part of Eddie's life as Eddie will allow – if he's lucky. If they all are.

He nearly changes his mind again when he walks into the library and hears the unmistakable sounds of a scuffle, but his fear drives him forward before it can drive him back. It drives him all the way to the axe he finds on the floor, and *he* drives *it* into the back of Bowers's head.

He'll probably never get over the sound it makes, the way it gives with a thud and a crunch before Bowers collapses onto the floor beside Mike. It's an entirely new kind of horror, one Richie doesn't have a name for. He tries to play it off like every action hero in every movie he's ever seen, but it's nothing like that. It's the furthest possible thing from funny.

This time when he throws up, he's not even surprised.

The sight of Eddie walking in with a giant bandage taped over the whole left side of his face doesn't do a lot for the shaking or for the jelly that used to be Richie's legs, but it might help a little that Eddie beats him to the punch the second they get a chance to have a semi-private exchange.

"Hey, are you okay? You look like shit," Eddie says, giving Richie a careful once-over, like he expects Richie to have a matching knife-wound that he's just neglected to mention.

"Coming from you," Richie says, giving Eddie's cheek a similarly pointed look.

"This vacation fucking sucks," Eddie says in lieu of an explanation. As if Richie really needed one, anyway.

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Richie gets one more golden opportunity to mouth off like an action hero before the day is over, but of course it ends worse than his first attempt. Bruce Willis had it easy, muttering "yippee-ki-yay" into a walkie talkie in a nice, lightly shot-up office building. Richie doesn't even get to finish his sentence before the rock he'd been holding falls harmlessly to the ground and he's flung someplace very, very far away from his friends and the cistern and Eddie.

When he comes back to himself, he's flat on his back and Eddie is crouched over him with a big, triumphant grin on his face. He's shouting something, but Richie is still reeling in and out of awareness too dizzyingly to follow most of the words Eddie tries to anchor him with.

—"think I got him, man, I think I killed him for real!"—and then Richie has to wrap his head around the thing that appears suddenly in the center of Eddie's chest. All he can think at first is, *That shouldn't be there.*

Richie's world doesn't slow down when blood starts to drip *up* out of

Eddie's mouth, and it doesn't speed up when he says Richie's name like he's the only person in the world who might be able to stand between Eddie and the terror lining every corner of his face.

His whole world grinds to a screeching, agonizing halt.

He watches the fucking clown laugh and swing Eddie's body around like it's all a joke, like it's funny, and Richie can't remember how to move. He thinks he says Eddie's name, but he doesn't think Eddie hears it, and then he's tearing down a damp, rocky slope to get to his best friend, but by then the terror's faded from Eddie's expression and he looks *resigned* and Richie can feel the twenty-seven-year-old fissure at the center of his being return to split open wider with every agonized breath Eddie struggles to draw. As if the wound were a part of Richie, too.

He thinks with cold, awful clarity, that it always will be.

Richie shies from the thought and strips his jacket off to press it to the wound. It's too filthy for the job, but then, so is everything in this fucking cave. Eddie could probably talk for hours about the infections he's likely to get from this, but for the first time ever he doesn't look like he cares. He's too busy telling them how to kill It, trying to keep the rest of them alive even as he's bleeding out, and Richie wishes he *weren't* so brave.

They get Eddie to higher ground, and Richie stays with him long enough to hear him rasp that he has to tell Richie something. It doesn't sound like he's effortfully forcing the words out anymore; it just sounds like precious oxygen running out of him, filling the stale air around them. It sounds important, too, and Richie's stupid enough to get his hopes up.

"I fucked your mother," Eddie says, and laughs around the blood sticking in his throat.

Richie doesn't bother hiding his disappointment or the gnawing fear that comes with seeing Eddie delirious from pain and blood loss. The other Losers are screaming abuse at the clown somewhere behind them; the whole goddamn situation would almost be funny if his hands weren't covered in Eddie's blood.

Richie doesn't want to leave Eddie's side, but when Eddie presses a blood-streaked palm to Richie's cheek and tells him to go help, Richie can't refuse.

"Don't you fucking die on me," he tells him first. "I'll be right back."

Eddie just smiles, soft and unfocused, and he doesn't make a promise to match.

Maybe a part of Richie feels Eddie's last breath leave him with no one around to hear it go – the part that snaps, maybe, the part that doesn't know or care how awful it felt to do real harm with his own two hands. The part that wrenches one of the clown's sharp-tipped spider legs clean off and relishes it. He hopes it's the one that hurt Eddie; he hopes it hurts Pennywise ten times as much.

His friends have to drag him out of that hole, and every step of the way Richie struggles to claw his way back to Eddie, to drag him out, to breathe life back into him or else die with him.

He thinks it would have been better than the slow, walking death that leads him lost and then crying into the arms of his friends. He's waist-deep in water that's only marginally cleaner than everything else they've been in recently when he finally lets his eyes fall shut behind the veil of his hand.

When he opens them again, the warm summer-morning sun is gone, replaced by harsh blue light and sharp-edged rocks that dig into his back. Eddie is above him, smiling, shouting, and Richie doesn't think; he just grabs Eddie and yanks him down.

He knows Eddie feels the gust of cool, damp air as the blade passes a hair's breadth from his back; Richie sees his eyes widen as clearly as he sees the limb slice through the empty air.

"How did you"—

"Lucky guess," Richie croaks. He lets his hands linger at Eddie's sides long after he's managed to get them both out of the line of fire, and Eddie lets him, not because he's too injured to shake him off, but because Richie's too clearly unsteady on his feet. He feels like wet

clay left out in the sun, slow and stiff and structurally unsound. Like he's melting, or like half his nerve endings are still screaming through an endless void being force-fed the worst of all possible realities.

He doesn't let go of Eddie until they've all made it back out to the lawn in front of Neibolt, and it's only then that Eddie lets go of him, too. Richie misses the contact as soon as it's gone, but when Eddie turns to give him another of his quietly appraising looks, he makes sure to answer it with the most reassuringly laid-back grin he can muster.

If Eddie notices all the furtive, just-making-sure glances Richie throws his way as they all head down to the quarry, he doesn't comment on them, and Richie's content for once to listen quietly to the easy, tired conversation the rest of the Losers share until they get there.

It's so much better than the funereal silence of the first walk he remembers making.

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Somehow, though, even peeling off the still-damp, clingy fabric of his jacket and button-down doesn't rid Richie of the capital-w Weird feeling he's had since the moment he snapped back to the real world and out of the nightmare one the Deadlights showed him. Even jumping into semi-clean water with Eddie safe and alive at his side doesn't dispel it. He can almost convince himself it's just intense, well-earned exhaustion or fried nerves, but while he definitely has both of those in spades, he also has a nagging suspicion that there's something else wrong.

Case in point – he jumps about a foot when Bill interrupts an impromptu splash war by tapping him on the shoulder.

"Jesus, fucking warn a guy," Richie hisses, whipping around to face him.

Bill raises his hands slightly in mock surrender, and that's when Richie notices the concerned look on his face.

"Did you s-s-see something?" Bill asks without any further preamble.

"More than I bargained for," Richie says, and rolls his eyes.

Bill sighs. "In the D-Deadlights, R-Richie."

That brings Richie up so short that he doesn't even have a joke ready to hide behind.

"*Why?*"

Bill shrugs. "W-well, Bev did, and it wasn't exactly trivial s-stuff. Did you"—

"Hang on, hang on, hang on – are you asking me if It's really dead?" Richie shakes his head, mostly out of pure incredulity. They all crushed Its fucking heart in their bare hands, for Christ's sake. "No, Bill, I didn't see any geriatric clown-bashing in any of our futures."

"But you did see *something*," Eddie interrupts.

Richie stiffens and for the first time all day, resolutely *doesn't* look at Eddie. The oozing discomfort lying just beneath his skin gives an odd little lurch, but he elects to ignore it.

"Doesn't matter," he says flatly, and then very gracelessly decides to change the subject. "Anyway, might as well head back, right? I'm beat, and Eddie looks like shit."

He almost makes it all the way onto the rocky shore before Eddie catches up with him, loudly voicing his frustration with Richie's uncharacteristic reticence every step of the way.

"We all saw you pull me out of the way at *the* last possible second, asshole, there is *no way* you saw that fucking thing coming without"—

Eddie catches Richie by the wrist, then, and his voice cuts out with a startled gasp as something like pure energy jolts all the way through

Richie from that single point of contact. Reality seems to bend for a long, drawn-out moment before abruptly snapping back into place so disorientingly fast that Richie's knees buckle and he pitches forward into shallow water.

He searches for the sound of Eddie's raised voice somewhere behind him, but Eddie must have felt it, too, whatever it was, because all Richie can hear is scattered exclamations from the rest of their friends before he finally blacks out.

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Eddie wakes up to someone gently but insistently patting his recently-stabbed cheek; he recoils well before he realizes that it doesn't actually hurt, which is far from the weirdest thing that manages to grab his attention through the hazy drag of unconsciousness.

There's something on his face, but it isn't a gauze pad and tape; he grunts irritably and reaches up to bat at the hand and the... whatever it is, which is how he notices that his voice sounds a little off, too. Well, that's just fucking great. So he's passing out at random and maybe also catching a cold – or worse, given that he just spent all night trudging through sewers with an open wound –

Beverly's voice cuts into his internal diatribe just as Eddie's hand closes around a pair of glasses.

Why the fuck is he wearing glasses?

"Richie? Hey, are you okay?"

Eddie frowns, worry briefly overriding his growing frustration. He forces his eyes open and sees Ben and Bev both hovering over him with twin looks of near-panic, and behind them, bright blue sky, a few trees... all of it foggy thanks to the smudgy, cracked lenses of what have to be Richie's glasses. Why the fuck would Richie give him his glasses?

“What happened to”—and he stops, because his voice sounds *really* off, as in so far off that it can’t be his – but it can’t *not* be, because he felt his lips move, a hundred percent –

While he’s still puzzling *that* over, Ben jumps right into an explanation-slash-question that only makes things *more* confusing.

“We thought you’d know,” he says, like it’s an embarrassing admission. “You and Eddie both just... passed out. It didn’t look like anything actually happened”—

“What the fuck do you mean, ‘me *and* Eddie,’ I’m literally right h— jesus fuck, *why* do I sound like – like”—

Like *Richie*?

Eddie forces himself upright so fast that Beverly barely manages to get out of the way in time, and that’s in spite of how ungainly Eddie’s limbs are. It’s like there’s suddenly more of him than he knows what to do with; he feels slow and heavy, and his head spins with the abrupt change of position. His stomach lurches ominously, too, but that’s too many things to worry about at once, even for him.

He doesn’t even get a chance to inspect the rest of himself before he catches a glimpse of Bill and Mike knelt beside what is unmistakably *his body* , still out cold, maybe *dead* , for all Eddie fucking knows –

At least a dozen things immediately spring to Eddie’s mind, most of them colorful curses or variations on ‘this can’t be fucking happening.’ All he actually manages to say is, “Oh God ,” and then his stomach flips so violently that he pitches forward and pukes, half onto the ground and half onto his leg.

Except that it *isn’t* his. These aren’t his jeans *or* his sneakers, and the proportions are all wrong, too long and too thick, but he still cringes because he can *feel* it as if it *were* his. Eddie claps a too-big hand to his mouth and feels stubble he can’t believe he didn’t notice earlier; maybe this stomach isn’t his, but it *hurts* like it is.

At this point Bill and Mike have also taken notice of Eddie’s distress, but it isn’t his name anyone’s saying.

“Richie?”

“Is he okay? Rich”—

“Quit fucking calling me that,” Eddie snaps when he’s fairly certain he can open his mouth without puking again.

“Your...name...?” Eddie manages to tear his eyes away from his body – his *real* body – long enough to see Ben looking at him like he’s completely lost it. Which would probably be more annoying if all signs didn’t point to that actually being the case.

Eddie doesn’t even bother answering; he just settles right into a long stream of panicked muttering. Not my name, not my hands, not my clothes – he tries taking Richie’s glasses off and promptly shoves them back on when everything around him dissolves into blurry, colored blobs. Not my fucking *eyes* –

He only stops when he hears a new voice through the ignorable buzz of his friends’ attempts to get him to respond to their questions. His eyes – his *body’s* eyes – flutter open, and his body’s lips part to breathe a single word.

“What...?”

Eddie doesn’t know if that voice sounds weird because he never hears it at a distance, or if it’s because the person speaking isn’t really him. He hopes it isn’t, anyway, because he *really* doesn’t think he could handle having a fucking doppelganger on top of everything else. And besides – if he’s *here*, then Richie has to be *somewhere*. He *has* to be.

“Richie,” he says, quietly at first and then loud enough that he sees his own face react with a confused frown.

“N-not funny, Rich,” Bill snaps at him, right as Bev tries to “beep beep” him.

“I *said*, I’m not”—

“I don’t think he’s joking,” Mike says. “This could be really bad. Maybe we should”—

“I didn’t even say any— uh, what the fuck”— Eddie watches his body struggle its way into a semi-sitting, semi-proppped-up-by-Mike-and-Bill position. He watches it bring a hand up to its throat – *his* throat, *his* – and then drag it on up to his mouth. He watches his own eyes go wide as they slowly take in the rest of his body – the ring on his finger, his wristwatch, his rumpled, filthy clothes, and the bandage on his cheek.

By the time not-Eddie drops fluttering hands to his chest in an obvious panic – as though he were searching for something there, Eddie thinks, but he can’t imagine what, or if the ideal outcome is finding it or *not* – his breaths are already starting to come in loud, shallow, wheezy gasps.

“Fuck,” Eddie hisses, remembering the melted remains of his emergency inhaler lying somewhere hundreds of feet underground. Ben and Bev rush to Eddie’s body too fast to support Eddie-in-Richie’s-body when he tries to stand up, so maybe he’s lucky that he stumbles before he’s made it even halfway to standing; the ground would’ve been a much longer way down, otherwise.

“I can’t,” his own voice is saying between quick, short pants. “I c – Ed – Eddie – what”—

“Right here,” Eddie says at the end of an awkward shuffle up the narrow shoreline of the quarry. The effect is even more unnerving up close; he’s never seen his own face look that scared, and he can’t translate it to anything he can remember seeing on Richie, either, so of course the next word out of his mouth is just Richie’s name. Just to make sure.

His own face stares back at him, wide-eyed, and then Richie gives a jerky nod.

“Oh thank fuck,” Eddie breathes, “okay, you’re good, you’re fine”—

“Don’t – don’t feel f-fine,” Richie gasps.

“So don’t talk, idiot,” Eddie retorts. “Come on, you’ve seen me do this. You remember.”

“Eddie?” Bev says, and this time Eddie can see out of the corner of his eye that she’s looking at him, so he nods, too.

“What the f-fuck is happening?” Bill asks.

“How the fuck would I know,” Eddie mutters. “Richie, look, just focus on breathing. We’ll figure it out but please don’t fucking suffocate in *my* body before we can.”

He can practically feel everyone’s stares boring holes in him, so he very determinedly keeps his own attention focused entirely on Richie. Somehow, it helps him, too; the more Richie’s breathing starts to keep time with his own, the easier it is to convince himself he’s just staring into a mirror. A mirror in dire need of some Windex and with a big crack in one corner, but still.

Finally, Richie shrugs everyone off, Eddie included, and casts a sort of self-conscious glance around at them before settling again on Eddie.

“Thanks,” he says, and then, “so” – he draws the vowel out in a way that’s both reassuringly Richie-like and mild-to-moderately bizarre to hear coming out of Eddie’s own mouth – “this is fucking weird.”

“You’re telling me,” Eddie says in Richie’s voice.

“Do either of you want to fill the rest of us in?” Ben prompts. “Guys?”

“He’s me,” they both say in unison – Eddie with a sweeping gesture at Richie and Richie just pointing.

“Gee, that really clears things up,” Mike says dryly. “How about this?” He points at Richie-in-Eddie’s-body first, and says, “Who are you, actually?”

“No jokes,” Beverly warns.

Richie grins; on Eddie’s face, it looks vaguely menacing. “But there’s so much potential, right Eds?”

“Potential for me to strangle you if you don’t cut the shit,” Eddie retorts. For everyone else’s benefit, he also adds, “That’s Richie.

Obviously.”

“But *Eddie*, you’d just be strangling yourself,” Richie continues. It’s a close approximation of his usual intentionally-obnoxious teasing, but Eddie has to wonder if he’s the only one who can see the tension seeping through the cracks in that nonchalant veneer. He wonders if he’s as transparent in Richie’s body – not that it matters, because unlike Richie, Eddie doesn’t feel the need to pretend he’s not deeply unsettled by this entire situation.

Bill turns to Eddie, next, and says, “So y- *you’re* Eddie?”

Eddie wraps borrowed arms around himself and says, “Yeah, that’s me.”

When no one says anything for several beats beyond *comfortable* silence, Richie speaks up again.

“Mike, please tell me you know how to fix this.”

Eddie perks up a little; he hadn’t even considered the possibility of an easy fix.

His heart sinks just as fast when Mike grimaces apologetically. “Sorry, guys, but as far as I know, there’s *no* precedent for this. I mean, it’s”—

“Never happened before?” Eddie guesses, burying his face, Richie’s face, *whatever* in his hands and fully ignoring whoever pats his shoulder. “Fuck.”

“Well, l-let’s think about it, though,” Bill says. “Just because it’s n-never happened before doesn’t m-mean we can’t fix it.”

“He’s right,” Bev agrees. “It could have something to do with the Deadlights. Richie?”

Eddie peeks over at Richie. He’s still wide-eyed and now also stock-still, lips slightly parted around a response that’s stalled somewhere in his throat.

“But *I* didn’t get caught in them,” Eddie tries to interject.

He's more or less drowned out by Richie, who suddenly blurts, "I was feeling weird."

Eddie stares at him, not quite accusatory but not quite *not*. "Weird how?"

Richie fidgets with the zipper on Eddie's jacket and says, without making eye contact, "After the Deadlights. Ever since I woke up, or – came back, or whatever. It was – kind of a lot like this." He brandishes a hand at the space between himself and Eddie. "Like..."

"Wearing something that doesn't fit?" Eddie offers. "No offense."

Richie shakes his head. "None taken. But – yeah."

He pauses for a moment and looks a little apprehensive when he adds, "I'm so sorry, Eds. I really didn't think it was a big deal. I swear I had no idea."

Eddie bristles. "Well clearly it is a big deal."

The sight of his own body flinching somehow just makes him mad, and maybe feeling that means *not* feeling quite as helpless; maybe it's easier to be pissed than it is to worry about being stuck like this for the rest of his life. Ben and Bev try to placate him while Richie starts to say something else, but Eddie doesn't want to hear his own voice directed at him as if it belonged to someone else – he just wants to lash out enough to make the fear dissipate.

"Would you fucking stop doing that with my face?!" Richie holds a palm out as if to say, '*Doing what?*' but Eddie doesn't give him a chance to actually respond. "What the fuck am I supposed to do if we *can't* fix this? Pretend to be *you*? Go back to my fucking life and hope no one notices I'm a completely different person? Either way, I'm sure it'll go over *great*."

"I"—

"Rich – Eddie," Bill corrects himself in such a hurry that his words lose the warning note he'd clearly been working toward. Eddie levels a glare at him and hopes it looks half as sharp as he wants it to. "We don't even know if it's b-because of that. N-not for sure."

“Really, because I don’t remember stumbling into any *other* weird alien magic recently,” Eddie mutters.

“I *said* I was sorry,” Richie says, but he doesn’t sound anywhere near as mad as Eddie thinks he wants him to. Actually, he just sounds – and looks – like he wants to cry. The fight rushes out of Eddie all at once, leaving him feeling worse than he had before. *Way to be a fucking jerk*, he thinks. *Just act like it isn’t your best friend behind that face. Must feel great getting yelled at by your own body.*

“Fine,” Eddie mutters, dropping his eyes to a small tear in Richie’s pants. Whatever caused it nicked the skin underneath it, too. It stings a little; he resists the urge to pick at it.

“Look, I can’t even imagine how weird that has to feel,” Ben says, more to Eddie than to Richie, “but fighting about it isn’t going to solve the problem.”

Eddie doesn’t quite succeed at forcing himself to respond before Beverly cuts in with a contemplative, “It happened when you both passed out, right? Maybe recreating that moment would reverse it.”

Richie reaches up to his – Eddie’s – face with one hand and frowns slightly when it closes around nothing a fraction of an inch from his temple. It takes Eddie a moment to realize that he’s trying to adjust his glasses, and another moment to remember that *he* needs them too badly to make a peace offering of them.

Richie drops his hand back to his lap and says, “That sounds like a good place to start. Eds?”

Eddie pretends not to notice the quaver in his voice. He makes Richie’s sound weirdly flat when he says, “Okay.”

Ben and Mike both help him to his feet unprompted. Beverly offers a steady hand to Richie, but he just shakes his head and stands up fine on his own. Eddie’s honestly relieved, even if it is a little unfair that it takes him several wobbly steps just to start feeling like he’s not about to faceplant.

He would’ve thought that seeing everything from Richie’s height

would be exhilarating, or at least that it'd provide a nice confidence boost. Richie's always had plenty of that, after all.

In practice, though, it's just incredibly awkward. Towering over half his friends – his own body included – and suddenly finding himself at eye level with Ben and Mike is disorienting. Eddie can't stop thinking about how hard it would be to fly under the radar if he were to feel the need for it.

Richie strides up to him and gives him a slow once-over that makes Eddie's skin prickle. He's tempted to bend over so they'll at least be at eye level, but he doesn't, if only for the smug satisfaction of making Richie look up at him for once.

"Huh," Richie says finally. "Jeez, you really are small. How do you survive going to the movies? Or concerts? You bring a booster seat?"

Eddie rolls his eyes. He hasn't been to a concert since he was in college, but he's not about to give Richie the satisfaction of admitting that standing venues actually *are* a pain in the ass for exactly that reason. "Richie, we used to go to the movies together all the time and never had any problems. I feel bad for everyone who's ever had to sit behind *you*, though."

"Sounds like someone's jealous," Richie coos.

Eddie gives him a flat look. "Jealous of what, your shitty eyesight? You better have a spare pair of these," he says, gesturing at the cracked lens of Richie's glasses. "I can barely fucking see."

"It's just one little crack!" Richie says, a little too defensively.

"...You don't, do you."

"...Not with me."

"Guys, f-focus," Bill says. Eddie can't help but notice that he and the others look relieved. The less they have to deal with the two of them being at each other's throats, the better, maybe.

"Right," Eddie huffs, and grabs Richie's hand to drag him back toward the water. He'd been hoping somewhere in the back of his

mind that just touching again would be enough to make something happen; he tries not to dwell on his disappointment when it doesn't. Richie probably just assumes he's miffed about the glasses. He might be later, if this doesn't work.

"Do you think we should do this based on where we were, or, uh, where *we* were?" Richie asks when Eddie starts to walk ahead of Richie.

He stops. "Uh – the first one?"

Richie nods, and they get into roughly the same position they would have been in, Eddie's body trailing after Richie's, one hand on his wrist. Eddie mostly just feels profoundly stupid for doing this with all their friends watching in bemused silence from the shore. He also wants to crawl out of Richie's skin and back into his own; he doesn't think he likes being touched by his own body. It's a bizarre disconnect, seeing his own hand close around Richie's wrist and not being able to feel what it feels.

"I don't think it's"—

"No, come on, just – try a little higher up? And tighter – no, looser"—

"I think you guys were a little more to the left," Mike calls. Eddie pointedly ignores the clear amusement in his tone.

Richie sighs, but obligingly lets Eddie guide him into several more minute variations on that pose, as if they were getting their picture taken in the world's most unappealing photoshoot.

"You think it might be time for plan B?" Ben wonders after a while.

Richie looks at Eddie; Eddie barely manages to maintain eye contact with his own face staring back at him.

"Up to you," Richie offers.

Eddie deflates and starts trudging back to shore. He stumbles once, but Richie manages to catch him by the elbow so he doesn't go plummeting face-first into the water before he can right himself.

“Sorry,” Bev says as they rejoin the group and start back in the direction of their discarded shoes.

Eddie shrugs. “It was worth a try.”

“So what’s plan B?” Richie asks, not bothering to stifle a yawn. Eddie bites back another irritable request for him to cut it out with the stupid-looking faces, but that doesn’t mean Richie doesn’t notice his glare anyway. He responds with a confused look of his own.

“Can we sleep on it?” Beverly asks. “We might have better luck with this if we’re not all exhausted, right?”

Eddie hardly gets two words of a protest out before Bill chimes in. “M-maybe being unconscious will f-fix it, anyway. That is how it started, right?”

“Sleep it off,” Eddie says with another roll of his eyes. “Great plan.”

“Yeah, this isn’t exactly the common cold,” Richie agrees.

“Do either of you have any better ideas?” Mike wonders. When he doesn’t get an answer, he nods and says, “Alright, then let’s make this the official plan B for now.”

Eddie doesn’t bother arguing; he can feel the drag of bone-deep exhaustion more and more with every step he takes toward the top of the slope, and he doesn’t want to do Richie’s body the disservice of running it into the ground – literally or metaphorically, he thinks dryly as he stumbles and nearly falls for what might be the tenth time in half as many minutes of walking.

It’s more nostalgia than he’d ever willingly sign up for, tripping over every other thing like he’s just hit his first growth spurt. Richie hangs back to help him as best he can, and Eddie winds up having to catch *him* mid-fall a few times, too.

“So,” Richie says, a little awkward. Like he’s genuinely afraid Eddie will snap at him again, but even in Eddie’s skin, he’s still Richie; he can’t *not* crack jokes and tease. “How’s it feel to finally be tall, Eddie Spaghetti?”

“How’s it feel to finally have hair again?” Eddie retorts. The jab is unfortunately followed by another near-fall; Richie catches him with a startled laugh, and Eddie’s privately relieved that he doesn’t seem offended. He just runs a hand through his – through Eddie’s hair, causing a few strands to fall back across his forehead in the process.

“I could get used to it,” he says with a smile that makes Eddie’s face look oddly...pleasant. Eddie looks back down at his feet under the guise of trying to make sure he doesn’t trip on any more rocks or overgrown tree roots.

They’re not far from the car when Eddie finally trips on nothing and *actually* falls with a sharp, startled cry and the sting of skinned knees.

“Shit, are you okay?”

Eddie looks up to find Richie kneeling beside him with a hand already extended to help him back up. Eddie takes it, only to flinch when he realizes that he’s also managed to scrape up Richie’s palms.

“Sorry,” he mutters, gesturing between Richie’s now-torn jeans and the blood seeping out of his hands.

Richie blinks. “Oh...It’s fine. Those pants were probably toast already, anyway.”

Eddie wrinkles his nose. “Yeah, you can just toss all of that when we get back,” he says, gesturing at Richie and his clothes, soaked-through jacket included. Eddie seriously regrets not having the presence of mind to take it off *before* jumping into the quarry. Even Richie had, for fuck’s sake. “...I meant about getting hurt in *your* body, though. I promise I’ll clean all this up. Probably better than you would’ve.”

Richie doesn’t answer. He’s gone bright-red, which is something Eddie wasn’t aware his face could *do*, and it takes him a long time to guess why.

“...Wait, are you seriously stressing about having to take a *shower*? You better! We can’t just skip that after spending the entire night in

greywater! Do you have any idea how many infections”—

“Okay. I know,” Richie says shortly. He’s fidgeting again, picking at the edges of the jacket’s sleeves and avoiding eye contact with Eddie. His voice gets quiet, then, and he says, “How do you *not* have a problem with it?”

“Because I’d have more of a problem with the alternative? And *my* body has an open wound? And you don’t have anything I haven’t”—

Richie cuts him off with a shake of his head. “Okay. Fine. I just – if you have, uh – ground rules or anything...”

Eddie stares. Richie’s so weirdly tense that Eddie’s dying to ask him *why*, but that’s also why he doesn’t think he should. Richie’s expression is finally one that Eddie *does* recognize on his own face; it’s the look he gets when he’s *really* worried – when he’s spent so much time ruminating on improbable dangers that they’ve started to seem like certain realities. Add to that the blush, and Eddie doesn’t know what to do with any of this.

“Uh, no jerking off?” he offers, half hoping Richie will take the bait and make one of his trademark crude jokes. It’s almost concerning that he hasn’t already.

Instead of so much as cracking a smile, though, Richie pales alarmingly fast and makes another failed attempt at adjusting glasses that aren’t there. “I wouldn’t do that. I won’t even look. Is that – is that okay?”

Eddie opens and closes his mouth a few times before finally saying, “I...guess it’s a nice gesture? I’m assuming you want me to do the same?”

“C-could you?” Richie practically squeaks.

It takes everything Eddie has not to poke fun at him for being *such a fucking virgin* – especially considering the kinds of jokes he’s been making since they were *kids* – but he’s not too keen on making a complete asshole of himself twice in one day, so he just agrees.

“There are a few other things,” he starts to explain as an addendum.

His sleep schedule's shot to hell as it is, so that doesn't matter as much – at least, not yet – but Richie's apparent preoccupation with nudity aside, Eddie does have plenty of things he'd rather have done a certain way, especially when it comes to personal hygiene.

He doesn't get very far down that laundry list before Beverly cuts into their awkward little exchange. It almost comes as a relief, but maybe more so to Richie than to Eddie.

"Are you guys planning on sleeping out here, or can we head back sometime?" she calls after them.

"Coming," Richie calls back, climbing to his feet in a hurry. Eddie follows suit, but it's obvious enough that Richie's waiting to say something else that Eddie decides to linger for another moment instead of just taking off.

Sure enough, Richie lowers his voice and says, "Hey, Eds?"

"Yeah?"

"I – are you okay?"

"Are you okay?"

"I mean it," Richie insists. "Obviously this whole situation is completely fucked, but are you – y'know, okay?"

Eddie gives Richie another long, considering look. He's still wearing that super-serious, worried expression. It may be less disconcerting to see on Eddie's face than half the other expressions Richie's already pulled today, but on *Richie*, it's still weird. Eddie's first and only instinct is to get him to stop.

He turns to their friends and holds up one finger. *Just give us a minute.*

He's sure they won't be able to make out any of the details of their conversation as it is, but he still lowers his voice to match Richie's.

"Does this have something to do with what you saw in the Deadlights?"

Richie moves on to picking at Eddie's watch. "I don't wanna freak you out."

So it was something about me, Eddie thinks. "I'm not made of glass, Richie. I can handle it."

Richie laughs, but there's a bitter edge to it. "I know. I'm sorry."

"So?"

Richie nods like he's just made up his mind and looks back up at Eddie, brows still drawn together in a frown. "...Yeah. But it wasn't just *seeing*, the way Bev described it. It was kind of a...full-immersion thing. I didn't know it wasn't real until I woke up again—until I woke up."

"You saw me actually get stabbed," Eddie guesses. He'd kind of guessed that already; he's just surprised by the rest of it, and the haunted look on his face. Eddie can almost picture that look on Richie, damp with sweat, scared and disoriented with his hands making fists around any part of Eddie he could reach.

Richie swallows thickly. "I – I felt your blood on my face, Eds. And all over my hands. I tried"—his next breath comes through hoarse and painful-sounding, and he has to stop to collect himself. Eddie doesn't know what to do with his hands, so he shoves them into the pockets of Richie's jacket and waits for Richie to wrestle his nerves back down to a manageable level.

When it sounds like he's breathing easier again, he doesn't finish whatever he'd been about to say. Instead, he says, "You didn't – you died. And the last thing I saw before you woke me up was the quarry, so..."

Oh. "So that's why you were so freaked out."

Richie smiles, but there are tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. "So were you. Anyone would freak out if they woke up in someone else's body, Eds."

"You were saying my name," Eddie realizes. For some reason, that draws another flinch out of Richie.

“You’re my best friend, alright? Of course I was scared,” he says, back on the defensive. “Everything was weird and I just thought – ‘oh god, I didn’t save him at all.’ I don’t think”—

The crunch of gravel behind them alerts them to Ben’s approach. Whatever tension had left Richie on the heels of a few hard-earned admissions comes rushing back into his shoulders all at once. Eddie winces a little but doesn’t have the heart to complain about the muscle aches Richie’s gonna give him – or *himself*, depending on how successful plan B is.

“Is everything okay?” Ben asks. His gaze lingers on Richie, who looks like he’s just had an air horn go off in his ear.

“Yeah, we’re good,” Eddie says with a meaningful nod at Richie, who evidently notices the gesture but doesn’t seem as reassured by it as Eddie would’ve liked. “All things considered.”

They follow Ben back to the car while Richie makes several weak attempts at levity. A smokescreen, and they probably all know it. He and Eddie both slide into the backseat together by some wordless agreement, and Eddie spends the entire drive doing his absolute best to ignore the near-physical ache of seeing Richie-slash-himself looking so agitated.

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If stealing little touches was like a quick, static shot – a momentary thrill that could leave Richie tingling long after it ended – then being *in* Eddie’s body is like holding a live wire. Richie feels like a clumsy squirrel on a suburban power line; to put it incredibly lightly, he’s not having a good time.

It’s worse that he also has to see Eddie looking so drawn. He spends the entire car ride back to the townhouse with his shoulders hunched and his hands fisted in the fabric of his pants. Discomfort is written into every taut line of his body – well, of Richie’s, but the body

language is so *Eddie* that he can almost forget he's looking at himself.

He *wishes* he could forget the feel of Eddie's ring on his finger, and the sight of it every time he glances down and catches the sharp glint of metal. A simple, inoffensive band that might as well be a two-ton weight on Richie's chest. On some level, it might even hurt worse than the throbbing stab wound in his cheek. Richie's tempted to take it off to wash his hands or whatever and "forget" to put it back on, but that would be selfish – and dangerously close to a giveaway.

Besides, he probably needs that constant reminder, as unfathomably intimate as the situation is otherwise. *This is not yours.*

They trade phones without either of them having to actually suggest it; except for Bill, whose phone is waterlogged beyond repair, the Losers all have Eddie to thank for reminding them to empty their pockets in the car *before* entering the clown-infested sewers. It means Richie has something else to fidget with, which is good because he suspects he's been getting on Eddie's last nerves, messing with *his* clothes, *his* watch – but never his ring.

By the time they make it up to their rooms at the townhouse, everyone's so worn out that they don't wait to see how Richie and Eddie will work out the whole showering thing; they leave them in the hall with a few sympathetic looks and mumbled "good night"s, to which Richie responds with a crack about the sun being in the middle of the sky.

"Well," Eddie says, a little awkward, himself. "We should probably trade rooms."

Richie tries not to grimace. It probably would be easier to do that than to try to rearrange each of their possessions when they're both about ready to drop from exhaustion as it is.

Eddie gestures at the door to his room; Richie's stomach flutters, but he digs the key out of Eddie's pants pocket as Eddie says, "Mind if I show you the products I use? I can get them out for you."

"Yeah," Richie agrees, if only to delay having to enter Eddie's space, in Eddie's body, and face the overwhelming task of getting clean

without crossing any lines.

He just about panics when Eddie steps into the room ahead of him and then stops short.

“Wha”—

“Shit,” Eddie says. “Forgot about”—

“About what?” Richie says, not quite as level as he’d hoped.

Eddie steps aside and gestures at the bathroom. Richie immediately sees the problem; there’s a trail of blood leading from the sink to the bathtub and then back out the door. There’s blood in the bathtub itself, and blood on the torn-down remains of the shower curtain. The towel rod is lying on the floor.

“Jeez, Eds, none of you mentioned he snuck into your *room* .”

“Well,” Eddie says, “at least we know he won’t do it again.”

Richie winces.

“...Sorry,” Eddie mutters. “Uh, maybe we can just take turns with the one in your room?”

As if this entire situation weren’t a lot to deal with already. Richie shakes his head without really giving it any consideration. “No – no, I’m. I’m good. I’ll just clean this up.”

“By yourself?” Eddie says with a frown. “That’s not fair.”

“I don’t mind,” Richie insists. “Really, just – point me toward your hyperallergenic soap or whatever, I’ll be fine.”

“*Hy po* allergenic,” Eddie corrects with a little smile. “Alright, but let me know if you change your mind.”

He looks like he expects Richie to have changed it already by the time he’s finished laying out no less than three different prescription bottles, *plus* another two for tonight and one “just in case,” which is finally enough to get an eyeroll out of Richie. He also gets him set up

with four separate bottles for the shower, a stick of deodorant and a shaving kit—"But that can wait until you've slept, and *be careful*." He takes another out and starts to hand it to Richie when he pauses.

"Uh. Maybe not this."

Richie plucks it from Eddie's hands, takes one look at it, and feels Eddie's body flush hot for the second time in less than an hour. It's an unscented moisturizing lotion.

Reluctantly, he says, "I did promise to do whatever you, uh, need me to do."

Eddie sighs. "Well now that we're actually *here*, it's kind of"—

"I know. It's – it's up to you."

Eddie doesn't take the bottle back from Richie. "You can just keep it – you know, above the belt. And don't use it on my – your cheek. Obviously. Actually, for that, I have"—he turns around and digs in his comically large toiletries bag for a full-sized first-aid kit—"this – don't laugh, asshole, obviously it came in handy. There's gauze and antibiotic cream in here. I know it probably hurts, but can you please try to be thorough?"

It does hurt, and Richie doesn't exactly look forward to peeling the current waterlogged pad off to put a bunch of shit on that he just *knows* is gonna sting like a bitch, but he nods anyway. "Promise. Wouldn't wanna be responsible for ruining a pretty face."

Fuck, why did he say that? Eddie stares at him for a beat that feels like it goes on for hours, then rolls his eyes like he doesn't believe Richie meant it. That should come as a relief, but instead it just makes Richie want to repeat himself. No way Eddie doesn't know how handsome he's gotten, right?

"Okay, so do you have anything?"

Richie gives him a blank look.

"Anything I need to know? Rules, things to show me, whatever?" Eddie shuffles, impatient. Richie guesses by the stiff way he's holding

himself that he's just as uncomfortable as ever, and probably desperate for a shower. Better make this quick, then.

"Oh," Richie says. "Not really. Don't change how I look too much, I guess?" He struggles to come up with something else, but he's almost as distracted by the thought of Eddie having to take care of his body as he is by the reverse.

Eddie raises an eyebrow at him. "Like anything I could change wouldn't be an improvement."

"Oh, I mean..." Richie shrugs. "If there's anything that'll make you feel more...is it weird to say 'at home?' Have at it, within reason. Just don't pull any total dick moves like shaving my head."

Eddie's frowning again. "I was joking, Rich. I'm not trying to get you to back down on establishing some boundaries. I thought you'd have *more*. I mean – 'don't shave my head?' That's *it*? Of course I wouldn't fucking do that! "

Richie resists the urge to shrug again. It's patently unfair that he can't even enjoy being the thing that puts a blush on Eddie's face – because it's just him, just Richie and his stupid, embarrassing twenty-seven-year crush. He's less worried about getting back into his body than he is about getting *out* of Eddie's, and in the meantime—

"Look, I'm more – I just wanna make sure I don't fuck anything up for you as long as we're switched. I'm not that worried about how you'll treat that," he says, gesturing at his own body. "You're not exactly a slob when it comes to personal hygiene, and you're not enough of an asshole to fuck with me for laughs. I trust you, Eds."

Richie knows his own tells well enough to notice that when Eddie responds, he's a little choked up and trying very hard not to show it.

"You know it's not that *I* don't trust *you*, right?"

God, he's cute. And nice, underneath all the bluster, just like he always has been.

Richie shakes his head. He doesn't think Eddie would trust him alone with his body – especially not his *naked* body – if he knew Richie's

secret, and Richie wouldn't blame him for it. It stings, but he can live with knowing that as long as he never actually does anything to violate that trust. And as long as Eddie never finds out what he's hiding.

"It's fine if you don't. I'm trying to make it easier, is all."

"And all I'm doing is making a bunch of demands and yelling at you," Eddie huffs, frustrated and, to Richie's immediate alarm, even closer to tears than he was before.

"Hey, hey, no, it's okay, I specifically *asked*. I feel better knowing what you want," Richie insists. He almost reaches out to give Eddie a reassuring pat, but thinks better of it at the last second. "Gives you less reasons to make good on your promise to strangle me when we manage to switch back, right?"

Eddie laughs, and Richie wishes it didn't just sound like him. One nice thing about all this – when Richie laughs, he gets to hear it in Eddie's voice, up close and personal. Another guilty pleasure.

"I might still do it, just on principle," Eddie tells him. "But I *am* sorry for yelling at you earlier. I get that this sucks for both of us, and it actually does help that you're trying. You're a good guy, Rich. Thank you."

"Aw, Eds"—

"*But*," Eddie interrupts, one finger raised to shush him, "do me a favor and pay some attention to your own comfort, too, okay?"

All Richie can think to do is beam at Eddie; it's the easiest way to vent the sudden swell of affection that fills him fit to burst.

Eddie must not like how that big, dopey grin looks on his own face, because he's quick to avert his gaze. Richie doesn't miss the flush that spreads up the back of his neck as he turns back to his overnight bag one more time; he also doesn't know what to make of it, beyond a note-to-self to tone it down a little from now on.

Even that isn't quite enough to wipe the smile off his face, though.

Eddie comes back up with several travel-sized bottles of shampoo, conditioner and so on. They look exactly the same as the ones Eddie's already given Richie to use, which earns him a quizzical look.

"...I always pack a few spares," Eddie explains. "Do you mind if I use these, or did you bring something you prefer?"

Richie's smile turns sheepish. "Honestly, I wouldn't've had a *toothbrush* if I hadn't bought one at the airport. I kinda left my toiletries bag sitting on the counter, so... I guess I prefer your stuff, if anything. It's gotta be better than what they have here."

And he wouldn't mind smelling like Eddie, besides. Half the soaps he uses are unscented, but the shampoo and conditioner aren't. Richie only vaguely remembers what Eddie *used* to use from the small handful of times Eddie accidentally left the bottles in the shower when he slept over at Richie's, but he's pretty sure it's changed.

He's a little surprised when Eddie doesn't comment on his total unpreparedness, although he does wrinkle his nose over the idea of an airport toothbrush, for whatever reason.

In fact, he's already edging back toward the door to the hall, his eyes glued to literally anything but Richie.

"Okay, well – let me know if you need anything else," he says, a little rushed.

Richie does his best to look more relaxed than he feels. "Will do. Night, Eds."

The only response Richie gets is the door clicking shut behind Eddie, leaving Richie alone with the daunting task that stands between him and a good afternoon's sleep.

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When Eddie closes the door to Richie's room behind himself, the first

thing he does is press his back to it like he's just narrowly escaped a wild animal that's still howling through the wood.

When he lets his eyes fall shut, it's like he can still see that stupid, bright, *genuine* smile on his face – *and* on Richie's, the way it would have looked if he'd been in his own body when Eddie said all that. It's an odd sort of double vision, and with it comes the disconcerting realization that, as uniquely *Richie* as that expression was, it still shouldn't have looked as out of place on Eddie as it did.

It's not so much the expression itself; it's the buoyant joy behind it. It's the fact that Eddie can't remember feeling that in a long, long time – not enough to smile the way Richie smiles, anyway.

Knowing he put that smile there, one way or another, almost makes him feel that kind of joy – or satisfaction, or *something* – but that, Eddie decides, isn't important.

What's important is that he *also* hasn't forgotten Richie's blasé disregard for his own body. *I'm not worried about how you'll treat that.*

"That." It's almost as annoying as being unexpectedly shoved down the slippery slope of self-reflection that Eddie's managed to spend twenty-seven years avoiding.

Eddie lets the irritation of it drive him into the bathroom. Richie's body doesn't seem as inclined to work off stress by moving as Eddie's would be, but it's still a force of habit nevertheless. He sets his travel-sized bottles of soap, shampoo and conditioner down in the tub and thinks, *Fine*. If Richie doesn't care about the details of how his own body is looked after, then Eddie will care enough for both of them. He'll look after him so well he won't know what hit him.

He kind of likes that, anyway – thinking of this not as being cut off from a part of himself, but as a chance to take care of Richie.

That, unlike every other part of this, feels right. Easy, even.

Eddie finds Richie's bag tossed haphazardly onto the unmade bed, still zipped shut. In it, he finds a clean pair of underwear and a T-shirt he thinks he can safely assume was intended for sleeping – but

no pajama pants, or sweat pants, or *anything*. Eddie frowns. He doesn't want to sleep in jeans, but he can't exactly borrow one of his own pairs; it'd never fit on Richie's body.

"Did you just forget, or do you really sleep in your underwear?" Eddie mutters. He's almost surprised Richie wasn't visibly uncomfortable with that, too, so he half-suspects it slipped his mind again either way.

Well. That's probably just how it's got to be, then. Eddie returns to the bathroom and tugs off Richie's jacket and button-down. He debates leaving them in the bathroom trash bin, but Richie hasn't actually given him his express permission to do that, so instead he sets them as far out of the way of possible in a neatly folded pile.

He's just finished pulling Richie's shirt over his head when he catches a glimpse of himself in the bathroom mirror and stops dead.

Richie's body is less obviously muscular than Eddie's, but he's a *lot* broader; Eddie noticed it before, too, back at the restaurant, but with no shirt on and no one else around to gauge his reaction, it's harder to ignore.

He still casts a surreptitious glance around the room – at the window, in particular – before bringing a hand up to touch. Eddie doesn't know if it's just Richie's body or if it's *him*, but the skin under the palm of his hand twitches under the touch, and it feels – good. An unfamiliar kind of good, but one Eddie still somehow recognizes as falling outside the bounds of what he's supposed to allow himself – as the kind of thing people don't let themselves think or speak about.

And probably as exactly the kind of thing Richie *wouldn't* want him to do, which ultimately is what gets him to drop his hand back to the waistband of Richie's jeans. His heart is hammering in his chest, and the wide-eyed, pink-cheeked look on his face only makes it race faster.

Eddie's used to having thoughts and feelings that aren't *him* if he doesn't ever let them be, but he's *not* used to struggling so much to brush them off.

It's that fucking clown, Eddie decides. It's the clown and killing It and almost dying, and being alone with Richie and not being entirely himself, *that's* why Eddie's so fucked up all of a sudden. He turns resolutely from the mirror, but not before slipping Richie's glasses off and setting them on the edge of the sink. It makes everything go blurry, but at the moment that's something of a relief, and Eddie enjoys it despite the stubbed toe he gets for his efforts.

He keeps his promise to Richie, which is stupidly difficult. That's normal, Eddie's sure; nothing makes the simple act of *looking* more tempting than being explicitly told not to. Eddie keeps his eyes squeezed shut as much as he can, which has the added benefit of offsetting some of the weirdness of not being able to see well, anyway.

Touching, though – that's kind of unavoidable, if he wants to stick to his resolution to take especially good care of this borrowed body. Eddie swallows down the heavy thud of Richie's heart in his throat and turns the water down cold for the second half of the shower. In his own body, it'd probably be freezing enough to make his chest tight and his breathing labored; in Richie's, it just means he's that much more relieved when he's finally satisfied that he's done a thorough enough job. His little bottle of body wash is almost entirely empty, and he's washed Richie's hair twice for extra good measure.

He winds up putting the glasses back on before he gets dressed; he's already given Richie enough extra bruises on top of all the ones he probably got from their fight with Pennywise. No need to risk any more unnecessarily.

He takes them off again when he's done to clean them in the sink. He'd be more leery of using the edge of his shirt to clean the lenses if it weren't for the crack they already have; how much worse is he likely to make it, anyway?

He makes a mental note to ask Richie about it later.

And then he leans in close to the mirror and still doesn't put the glasses back on. Even when they were kids, Eddie only rarely saw Richie's face without them; he doubts Richie would have too much of a problem with Eddie looking at just his face, at least *now* when it

doesn't mean awkwardly long eye contact.

It almost feels like making awkward eye contact with Richie as it is, though, so Eddie decides to try something else. He tries to pull away from the mirror, too, but he quickly realizes that he can't fucking *see* unless his – Richie's – face is less than a foot from the glass.

"How do you *live* like this," Eddie gripes, and then he pastes on a smile.

Unsurprisingly, it looks nothing like the way Richie smiles. Maybe that's just because Eddie's faking it, though. Not all of Richie's smiles are genuine – not by a *long shot* – but when they are, they're *infinitely* more charming than the next several attempts Eddie makes to imitate them.

Frustrated, he takes a step back, slips Richie's glasses back on, and tries again. And again.

Richie's face is handsome even with Eddie behind it, there's no denying that, but it doesn't have the same spark of life Richie lends to it. It's a spark that's always gotten under Eddie's skin at least as much as all the little things Richie says and does.

Like making Eddie believe he can be brave. Like saving his fucking life and trying to avoid taking any responsibility for it. Like being thrust unceremoniously into this situation and still managing to worry more about Eddie than he does about himself. Small wonder that it's only just now occurring to Eddie that he should probably be annoyed by that, but then – coming from Richie, concern has never bothered him.

A few more of Richie's words bubble to the front of his mind, unbidden.

I trust you.

Well, Eddie thinks. He trusts Richie, too. He'd never actually tell him, but if he could have picked anyone in the world to entrust his body to, if he *had* to, he thinks maybe it still would have been Richie. Not Myra, and certainly not his mother, even if she were still around. The

other Losers, *maybe* – but even then, why *not* Richie?

He's about to leave the bathroom when the mirror catches his attention one more time.

This smile is one Eddie's never seen on Richie's face, either, but it's soft and sweet and it makes something in his chest feel strange. Painful, almost, but nice.

It's a good look for him – a smile Eddie can't quite put a name to.

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Richie quickly learns that taking an ice-cold shower is not the easy solution to his dilemma that he'd hoped it'd be. After less than thirty seconds under the stream, he has to stumble, swearing, back out just to catch his breath before he can turn the temperature up. He grumpily wonders why Eddie hadn't reminded him to avoid cold water if it was so likely to fuck up his breathing, but that's hardly fair. Eddie wouldn't have had any reason to think Richie would even *need* cold water to keep his fucking mind out of the gutter.

He gets through it one way or another without cutting the shower as short as he'd really like to. He even lets the warm water loosen the adhesive tape on Eddie's cheek as much as possible before he peels it off and perches it on the edge of the tub to throw away after. As expected, the wound stings a ton, but Richie still does his best to clean around it.

A bit of water actually manages to get into his mouth through the hole, which is enough to convince Richie that their first order of business after sleep and food should be a trip to the fucking hospital for some stitches. If their positions weren't so literally switched, he suspects Eddie would have already dragged them all there – not just for himself, but for the various cuts and scrapes they all have.

He still might, Richie thinks with a fond smile.

Getting towed off and then fully dressed again comes as a huge relief, at least until Richie has to put Eddie's ring back on his finger. How many childish fantasies did he have all those years ago about putting a ring on Eddie?

It should be a funny thought, but it just hurts. He always knew things wouldn't actually end up like that.

He has no idea if Eddie usually sleeps with it on; he doesn't know what *anyone* does with a wedding ring. He just knows he has no business taking it off just because he doesn't like it.

The one and only thing he allows himself, he justifies as a necessary part of cleaning up Eddie's cheek. It's refreshing, not having to worry about being able to see it without his glasses; as he unscrews the cap on some neosporin and hisses through the sting, he hopes Eddie's doing alright with that part. If this lasts more than a day or two, he'll be sure to get his hands on a fresh pair of glasses.

In the meantime, he drinks in the opportunity to explore every inch of Eddie's face. It's not as good as it would be if it were Eddie behind it, but it's really kind of amazing; he's changed so little from how Richie remembers him. Big, brown eyes, soft, thick hair, and his lips... Richie rinses his hands of the antiseptic cream and then runs a finger along Eddie's lower lip. He can almost pretend he's in his own body again, touching Eddie, watching Eddie's eyes light up with all the love Richie feels for him—

He drops his hand back to the first aid kit and hurriedly picks out a fresh gauze pad. The wound is weeping blood again; Richie can taste it, and if it didn't remind him of Eddie coughing around a lot more blood than that, he'd be grateful for how it drags him back down to reality.

Eddie's never going to look at him like that, but—

He finishes taping the pad down so it looks roughly like it had before, and then he picks his phone up and opens the camera.

Eddie's never going to look at him like that, but just in case Eddie wants nothing more to do with him when this is all over, maybe

Richie can be forgiven for keeping a little something for himself.

Getting that look back on Eddie's face is easy; all Richie has to do is think about him for more than a few seconds, then *click* goes the shutter – just once, because one is enough to get a beautiful shot of Eddie, and besides, Richie doesn't dare push his luck any more than he already is.

What Eddie doesn't know won't hurt him, but Richie can already feel the guilt starting to gnaw at the pit of his stomach. He puts his phone away and decides not to think about that again until he's truly desperate.

He finishes getting ready for bed the way he thinks Eddie would – slowly, thoroughly – so by the time he climbs under the covers, he can't make out any sounds from the neighboring rooms, his own included.

Falling asleep is the easy part.

He opens his eyes to blue-green, flickering light and damp, cavernous walls. He looks down at his hands and sees his own, no ring, slick with an inky, viscous substance he haltingly realizes is blood. When he looks back up, he sees Eddie – Eddie with his lips smeared with blood spilling down his chin to his throat, Eddie with a dark stain spreading across his chest.

Eddie is looking at him, too, and when he opens his mouth Richie already knows what he's going to say.

"I gotta tell you something."

Richie's mouth moves automatically, and he has so many things he wants to say, but they all die in his throat. He knows what he's going to say, too, and he knows better than to hope this time.

"What? What's up, buddy?"

"You're a good guy, Rich," Eddie says, and then he smiles so wide that Richie can see his teeth, and blood – so much blood, so much that it's like Eddie's face is dissolving beneath a steady flow of it. He says something else, too, or tries, but the words are smothered by

gore, and when Richie tries to touch his shoulder, it collapses like rotten fruit under his hand.

Richie wakes up to the sound of Eddie screaming, and a loud, rapid hammering. Like rocks falling from a collapsing ceiling, his panicked brain tells him.

“Richie? Are you okay? Open the fucking door, or I *will* break it down, I swear to god”—

His voice. Richie blinks blearily down at his hands and starts to catch his breath. Not his hands – Eddie’s. He holds one of them to the unbroken expanse of Eddie’s chest and doesn’t drop it even as he stumbles out of bed and to the door.

He’s less surprised to see himself, kind of, than he is to see Bev, Ben, Bill *and* Mike standing behind him.

“Took you long enough,” Eddie snaps at him, but he doesn’t look mad – or scared, or hurt. He looks worried, like everyone else.

Richie makes yet another failed attempt to adjust his glasses; it’s only then that he realizes Eddie isn’t wearing them, either.

“Was I that loud?” he manages, still short of breath, but not as painfully so as he was a few moments ago.

“Yes,” Ben says immediately.

“Bad dream?” Bev checks, a little tense.

Richie doesn’t bother trying *not* to look right at Eddie when he answers, but he does make a desperate effort to make a joke of it. Anything to keep the questions limited to just that one. “Oh no, it was really great, y’know, Eddie’s mom”—

“New rule,” Eddie interrupts, “ *no ‘your mom’ jokes when you’re literally in my body, asshole.*”

Richie swallows. “That’s fair.”

“Are you o-okay?” Bill asks. “It s-s-sounded pretty b-bad.”

"I'm fine," Richie says, putting on an extraordinarily forced grin. Eddie scowls at him – or maybe just squints, actually. It must be weird, going from this insanely clear vision to not being able to make out all the details of his own face from a few feet away.

"If you're fine, I assume you don't mind if I drop in to grab a few things," he says. "If I can even fucking see them."

Richie's already stepping aside and nodding at the rest of their friends. "Yeah, sure, whatever you need. You guys can go back to bed. It was just a dream, seriously. I'm more upset that sleeping it off didn't work."

It sounds like more of a joke than it really is, which is good. It seems to put everyone a little more at ease.

"Yeah, I was *so sure* that'd work," Eddie calls from somewhere behind Richie.

That earns a soft laugh from Richie – relieved, even, because it's really Eddie, even with that voice, and he's okay – just irritable.

He gets a few similarly relieved nods from the other four. They all give him various commiserative pats on the shoulder, arm, wherever as they turn to go – except Bev, who lingers long enough to ask him again if he's *really* okay.

"No," Richie admits, "but it's been – what, a few hours? Can you blame me?"

Beverly shakes her head. "Pretty sure we'll all get our fair share. Hang in there, Richie."

"You too, Bev."

He watches her go and thinks – he'll tell her eventually. Not about being in love, but about what he saw. Hell, he'll probably tell all of them, if only for the convenient excuse it gives him to be all wrapped up in Eddie.

Speaking of. Richie swings the door shut again and turns to face Eddie, who is, predictably, not even looking at his suitcases in the

corner.

He opens his mouth to say something, but Richie beats him to it.

“Hell of a wake-up call, huh?”

“...Yeah, nothing beats waking up to your own voice screaming a whole room away from you.”

Richie winces. “Sorry about that.”

Eddie rolls his eyes and takes a step back toward Richie. He looks a lot steadier on his feet now, and that’s in spite of how exhausted he must still be; Richie knows *he* is, adrenaline spike notwithstanding.

“It’s fine, Rich. Actually... you woke me up from one, too.”

“A nightmare? Are you okay?”

“Well,” Eddie says, and Richie immediately recognizes the way his eyes pass over every inch of Richie; even in Eddie’s body, it makes him feel like a lit match, and he can’t help wondering if Eddie likes what he sees. “Mine wasn’t about seeing you die in front of me, so I assume you have me beat.”

Richie can’t look away from Eddie’s pointed look. They both know he expects an answer to that unspoken question, so Richie says, “I guess so. Is there a prize for winning the ‘most fucked up dream’ contest, or”—

He doesn’t get to finish his sentence, because Eddie cuts him off with a hug.

“Yeah, a consolation prize,” he says, and Richie can’t think of anything to say back. It should be weirder, Richie thinks, being hugged by his own body, but he just sinks right into it, wraps Eddie’s arms as tightly around his own waist as he can and tries to blink back tears before they can soak into his own body’s shoulder.

This is what it would feel like to Eddie, if he ever let Richie touch him like this.

Eddie huffs. “You’re kind of right,” he grousing, “I do feel a little small – but only compared to you,” he rushes to add, like he expects Richie to be in any state to make a smart remark about it. Richie’s sure he sees the tears standing ominously in the corners of his eyes when he finally pulls away.

“So? Are you really okay?”

“You and Bev,” Richie laughs, trying not to miss the warmth of another body against Eddie’s. “I’ll live. And, you know, so will you. That’s all I – I mean, that’s good. Reassuring.”

He cringes internally. *Smooth, Tozier.*

Eddie doesn’t stop staring at Richie, which is a little unnerving; it’s like he’s staring through his own body right into Richie.

Richie half-expects him to keep the conversation rolling in a direction Richie’s not sure he has the energy to deal with after precious few hours of sleep, but instead he just grins and gestures almost sheepishly down at his clothes – or lack thereof, Richie realizes with a rush of embarrassment.

“Sorry about waltzing around in front of our friends in your underwear. *Someone* didn’t pack anything but jeans.”

Richie shakes his head. “It’s summer. Who wants to sleep in sweatpants in summer?”

“And yet you put mine on,” Eddie replies with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, you packed them!” Richie defends. “Sorry for assuming at least half of this shit was intended for actual use.”

“No, I just like having a lot to carry when I travel.”

“...I can’t tell if you mean that.”

“Every word,” Eddie says with another roll of his eyes. It doesn’t have as much impact on Richie’s face as it would if it were Eddie, but that’s alright; Richie’s getting better at picturing the way he thinks Eddie *would* look.

"Just do me a favor and put on some clothes next time," Richie says.

"I wouldn't have to if you'd just sleep through the day," Eddie retorts, already moving back toward the door. He pauses with his hand on the knob and looks at Richie again. "Rich – for what it's worth, mine was about you, too. When you were caught, before I got you down. So"—he looks away—"I don't know, I get it?"

No, you don't, Richie wants to say, but he doesn't because it's better that way. He wants to ask why, too, but he can't hope for answers he'll never get, and Eddie's already leaving again, anyway.

Richie lets him go, and he holds his tongue.

The only thing that calms him down enough to sleep again is curling in on himself under the covers and pressing his nose to the crook of Eddie's elbow. With his eyes shut, it's just like having Eddie himself right there with him, warm and safe and so, so close.

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Beverly wakes up to the sound of a gentle knock at her door several hours later. She rolls over and sees that the light filtering around the edges of the window shades hasn't vanished yet, although it has turned a deeper golden-yellow.

"Be right there," she says around a yawn.

She pads over to the door, making sure to look through the peephole before she unlatches it.

"Ben," she greets with a still-sleepy smile. "Hey."

"Hey," he echoes with a shy smile of his own. "Uh, I was gonna go get something to eat, if you wanted to..." He trails off and gives her a hopeful look that makes Beverly's own smile broaden.

"Great idea. I'm starving," she says, enjoying the way Ben's eyes light

up in response. She holds up one finger and starts to slip back into her room. “Wait right there,” she says, “I’ll just change into something that isn’t meant for sleeping in, alright?”

A blush rises to Ben’s face, and he nods. “Okay.”

It really looks like he hasn’t moved an inch when she steps back out into the hallway with him, but he makes way for her as easily as water parting when she does.

“Where to?”

Ben shrugs. “Maybe something we can bring back for everyone?”

Beverly nods thoughtfully, then stage-whispers, “I’m sure they won’t mind if we eat ours there first, though.”

Ben laughs. “I like the sound of that. There’s a new place just down the road, if you’re up for the walk. It’s... nothing fancy, but”—

“It sounds great to me,” Beverly tells him, taking his hand and tugging him down the hall toward the stairs. “Come on, let’s see what they’ve got.”

What they’ve got turns out to be delicious, especially to two people who haven’t eaten in almost a day. She and Ben linger over coffee until the lengthening shadows outside finally start to blend into the low light of dusk, and only then do they even think about ordering a few things to take back to the townhouse. It’s pretty standard diner fare, which of course means they haven’t exactly caught on to the whole gluten-free thing; neither she nor Ben is actually all that sure of what Eddie can and can’t eat aside from that, so they settle for getting a bunch of sides and figure Eddie will be able to wrangle Richie into eating only the ones he thinks his stomach can handle.

That goes over better than either of them expects it to, actually. Eddie doesn’t even have to broach the subject with Richie; Richie takes one look at the spread Ben and Bev have brought back for them and turns an expectant look on Eddie.

“Sooo, which if these can I eat without keeling over?”

Eddie's mannerisms are somewhat jarring to see played out on Richie's face. He chews on his lower lip, crosses his arms and says, "Uh, hash browns, cole slaw, a *little* bit of omelette, but don't overdo it. What about you?"

"What *about* me?" Richie asks, already reaching for a plastic spoon to pile some hash browns onto a styrofoam plate.

"What do you want me to avoid?"

Beverly shrugs at Ben, who looks at least as surprised as she is. They'd both fully expected Richie to launch directly into a bunch of complaining about not being able to eat the good stuff. Hell, Beverly almost wouldn't blame him; she's still basking in the contentment that comes with a good, much-needed meal.

And better company, she thinks, feeling her gaze soften. Ben still has a little bit of egg stuck to one corner of his mouth; he has no idea, and Beverly finds it so inexplicably cute that she doesn't want to tell him, *just yet*.

Richie, meanwhile, is shrugging and saying something about not having allergies. "Think of it as a chance to live a little."

Clearly he notices the dissatisfaction on his own face, because he laughs around a mouthful of potato and says, "Seriously, enjoy it. I'd kill for a burger right about now."

"Could you *please* not chew and talk at the same time," Eddie groans around the hand he presses to his face. He shoots Bill a dirty look when he laughs, but it does nothing to detract from anyone's amusement.

Richie swallows obligingly and says, "Fine, if you'll let me live vicariously through you."

"You're so dramatic," Eddie sighs, reaching for half of one of the two burgers that are laid out on the table. "This stuff's overrated anyway."

He takes one bite, and his eyes widen behind the glasses.

“See?” Richie says, leaning in like it’s his own cooking he’s waiting for feedback on.

“Fuck, you’re right,” Eddie groans. “It’s been so long since I’ve had one of these.”

“Y-you can have the other half, too,” Bill chuckles.

Eddie looks at Richie, who shoots him a thumbs-up with a wide, pleased grin on his face. For some reason, the encouragement actually makes Eddie pause mid-bite and stare for a moment. Beverly wonders if he’s disgruntled over the sight of that expression on his own face, but he doesn’t *look* upset, even when he turns back to his own food with a frown. He looks more like he’s mulling something over, which doesn’t keep Richie from worrying, if the look he gives Bev when they make eye contact is anything to go by.

She just shrugs at him, and he makes a very Eddie-like expression – like he’s holding something back.

Beverly is pretty sure Mike’s noticed something up with the two of them, too, but he doesn’t look like he’s any closer to figuring out what’s wrong than she is. Whatever it is, maybe it’s to be expected, given the circumstances.

Or it could be nothing, she decides as she watches Eddie and Richie get into an argument-slash-competition over who can do a more convincing impression of the other. Eddie insists it doesn’t matter anyway – that anyone not in the room with them right now would just assume they’d lost their respective minds if they noticed anything off at all.

“Well what about in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* ?” Richie argues. “The aliens looked just like the people they replaced, and a bunch of people kept saying ‘*That’s not my uncle! That’s not my mom!*’”

The high-pitched voice he puts on gets a round of laughter out of everyone; even Eddie fails to stifle a laugh that comes at just the wrong time, nearly choking on the coffee he’d been sipping as a result. “Now you’re just looking for excuses to do impressions with *my* voice,” he accuses.

“Guilty,” Richie singsongs, to Eddie’s clear distaste.

Even Eddie has to admit that Richie does a good impression of him, though; he gets something about the intonation just right, but Eddie speaking with Richie’s voice sounds just the slightest bit off no matter what he does.

“Yeah, Myra would never know the difference,” Eddie mourns only semi-jokingly.

Richie laughs, but Eddie’s face has gone a little red underneath Richie’s show of amusement. “Nah, she’d – she’d definitely notice something was up,” he says, too subdued. Beverly watches him fidget uneasily with Eddie’s wedding ring and realizes one thing, at least – that she can imagine the weight of that little metal band the way it looks like it feels to Richie. Like a vice, or just too heavy to bear comfortably.

Not for the first time, she rubs absently at the empty spot on her own finger, and not for the first time, she’s glad to be rid of it.

What that means for Richie, though, she doesn’t know. No one says anything about it, and as the conversation drifts on to other subjects, Beverly almost manages to forget.

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After they finish eating, Richie suggests a trip to the hospital to get his stab wound looked at – or ‘stitched up,’ as he puts it. Eddie agrees, but talks him down to going to an urgent care, instead.

“Unless you’d rather spend the entire night in the E.R.,” he says. Richie just nods in agreement, because they’re *all* too tired for that. It may be the prudent thing to do, but Eddie also recognizes this little excursion for what it is – a convenient way to stay awake a little longer before the inevitable late-night crash. They have a *lot* of sleep to catch up on, but it can’t hurt to at least try to keep somewhat normal hours through the ordeal.

No one is particularly surprised when Ben and Bev volunteer to stay behind at the townhouse. They say it's to clean up the mess they've left in the lobby, but Eddie thinks he knows better.

It's sweet, though. They're happy; he's happy for them.

He's also a little jealous, but that's another feeling he doesn't know what to do with, so he buries it as best he can and doesn't worry about how hard it is.

They're on their way to the nearest urgent care – still open, albeit with almost no time to spare – when Eddie sees Bill and Mike exchange a look in the rearview mirror of Bill's car.

Mike's expression poses a question Eddie can't decipher until Bill gives him an affirmative nod. Mike clears his throat.

"Richie, Eddie, I've been thinking..."

Eddie straightens up in his seat. "Yeah?"

"Well, there's a pretty good chance it *won't* work, but I have this, uh..."

Mike glances back at Bill, who laughs shortly and says, "'R-root with properties.'"

Richie snorts. "I'm guessing this isn't the kind of root people usually put in tea."

"Licorice root?" Eddie says hopefully, but he's guessing – and dreading – the same thing.

"No," Mike says. "It's a potent hallucinogenic drug." He turns back to face them, one hand raised to hush any immediate protests either of them might have. "But it's all-natural and completely harmless, I swear. Bill took it, or – uh, I gave some to Bill?"

"H-he drugged me," Bill says, like it's the most normal thing in the world.

"I drugged him. But he was fine!" Mike says with forced cheer.

Eddie blanches. Even Richie looks taken aback.

“Uh, is there an actual *reason* you think we should risk a bad trip in each other’s bodies, or is this a ‘just for shits and giggles’ kinda thing?”

“M-M-Mike and I were *thinking*,” Bill says. “It c-could show you a s-solution.”

“You want us to take a drug we know nothing about for *inspiration*,” Eddie repeats slowly.

“Kind of?” Mike says.

“It d-doesn’t even last that l-long,” Bill promises.

Richie and Eddie exchange a glance.

“No.”

“Nope.”

Mike shrugs, turning back to face front. “If you change your minds, I can get you a low dose anytime.”

“Absolute last-ditch plan Z,” Richie says, “*maybe*.”

Eddie just shakes his head. He doesn’t want that shit in his body, and he doesn’t want to be responsible for putting it in Richie’s. Even if Bill and Mike are right, Eddie wouldn’t risk seeing any more horribly unpleasant shit than he already has, and that goes double for Richie, whose badly-shaken post-nightmare expression Eddie still can’t get out of his head. It’s like a bad song, stuck on loop alongside thoughts about the way Richie smiles when he’s looking at Eddie.

At least he wants to see more of *that* – and on Richie’s face, not *his*, but Eddie will settle for using his imagination in the meantime. He can think of it as a kind of research, anyway – part of finding an answer to the niggling question of why his own face doesn’t bear Richie’s joy as well as he feels like it should.

The receptionist at the urgent care is very unimpressed by their last-

minute appearance until she gets a look at Richie and the little spot of blood that's managed to soak through the gauze on his cheek. She gets them signed in after some moderately awkward fussing over whose insurance and credit cards to use, and from there it only takes about five minutes for Richie to be called back – by Eddie's name, naturally.

Without thinking, Eddie gets up to follow Richie and the nurse who's come to get him.

He pauses as soon as his brain catches up with what he's doing. Should he assume Richie's okay with Eddie tagging along? Sure, Eddie wouldn't mind being able to keep an eye on his own body, but what if Richie would prefer to be alone for the unpleasantness of needles in his face?

It's *incredibly* unfair that he has to deal with the worst parts of an injury that isn't even his in the first place, but what can either of them do about it?

"Coming?" Richie asks him, one eyebrow raised in quiet amusement.

"If – if that's okay?"

"It can be nice to have the moral support," the nurse cuts in. Eddie doesn't know why the comment irks him, but he lets it slide as an excuse to follow Richie down the hall to an exam room.

They do a clumsy job of brushing over the source of the stab wound when the nurse asks about it. Lucky they're apparently not the only ones who are tired and just want to get out of here as quickly as possible; in classic Derry fashion, she lets the matter drop with minimal interest and moves on to a few more basic questions. Some of them, Eddie answers for him. Has he had a tetanus shot recently? Fortunately and by wild coincidence, yes.

The nurse types up the information she needs and then leaves them to wait for the doctor to drop in.

"Nervous?" Eddie asks, breaking the tense silence that follows and going as far as getting up from his uncomfortable doctor's office chair

to hover beside Richie.

Richie shrugs. “I like needles in my face about as much as the next guy.”

“...Yeah. Thanks for doing this, Rich. Sorry you even have to.”

Richie smiles. It’s a little strained, but still contagiously warm beneath that. “Hey, at least it means *you* don’t.”

Eddie sighs, exasperated. “I think I’d be an asshole if that made me happy.”

“You’re not an asshole,” Richie disagrees as if on cue.

Eddie gives him a skeptical look until he hedges, “Well, maybe, but you can get away with it.”

Eddie doesn’t have time to ask what *that’s* supposed to mean before the doctor knocks once on the door and then comes right on in. They exchange the usual formalities, run back through a lot of the same questions the nurse already asked, and then get down to the worst part.

Eddie is duly impressed by how clean the injury looks when Richie reluctantly peels the tape off. The doctor takes one look at it and nods to herself.

“You did a pretty good job with it,” she compliments Richie.

“Thanks, doc,” Richie says with a charming little smile.

“I do think it would be best to close it up,” she continues. “I’ll clean it one more time for you first, but it looks like it’ll heal nicely. That’s good news for an injury that’s gone so long without professional medical attention.”

Richie manages to look sheepish, like it’s entirely his fault that they’re cutting it so close, and not the fault of one extraterrestrial, child-eating sewer clown.

“And you’ll numb it?” Eddie checks, giving Richie an absent-minded

pat on the shoulder.

“Oh, of course.”

Eddie notices Richie’s hands making tighter and tighter fists in his jeans while the doctor prepares a syringe with a local anesthetic, and he thinks... moral support, right?

Richie jumps a little when Eddie reaches across to take one of his hands, but he doesn’t pull away. In fact, he gives Eddie a grateful look and adjusts his grip so he can squeeze back.

It’s not a smile, but it still makes Eddie’s chest swell with affection.

Richie doesn’t let go until the last stitch is in place and covered up with a fresh gauze bandage. He even spends the better part of the few minutes it takes just staring at their joined hands. Eddie finds himself doing the same; it’s funny, but with their fingers all tangled together, it’s easy to forget whose is whose.

The doctor leaves again, and the nurse comes in to give them a few additional instructions for at-home care. Richie takes the printed copy she hands him like it’s the deed to his grandmother’s house, and then they’re sent on their way with a promise that the numbness should wear off in a few hours.

It could just be Eddie’s imagination, but he could swear that every second of the drive back to the townhouse adds to the almost magnetic pull between his and Richie’s hands. If it weren’t for the way Richie carefully avoids eye contact with him even as his fingers twitch at his sides, Eddie thinks maybe he’d let that pull close the distance between them. He wouldn’t even need an excuse.

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Ben and Beverly are still loitering by the bar in the townhouse lobby when the four of them march back through the door. By that point, Bill’s already made it several minutes into explaining his theory on

brain transplants as a cure for swapped bodies, while Eddie's getting increasingly wound up over how completely impractical it all sounds. Mike keeps trying to provide reasons why Bill's ridiculous ideas could actually work, and Richie, for his part, still hasn't made up his mind about how serious Bill actually is. If he's joking, he's giving Richie and his occasional deadpan delivery a huge run for their money.

He might be the only one who actually greets their friends with a little wave as they all make a beeline for the nearest sparsely-cushioned surfaces to collapse onto. Bev returns the gesture with an odd, considering look on her face.

She and Ben wait until the conversation hits a natural lull before they exchange a meaningful look. It's not unlike the one Bill and Mike had shared moments before recommending hard drugs as a potential plan C, so of course all Richie can think before Ben nods and opens his mouth is, *Oh no*.

"Have you guys thought about kissing?"

Richie doesn't know if his face – Eddie's face, *Eddie's face*, a voice in the back of his mind chants unhelpfully – has gone hot or cold; he could be blushing red or bone-pale, eyes frozen wide and words sticking painfully in his throat.

"L-like in general, or." He swallows. "No. Hadn't. Uh. Thought of that."

Stop being weird, another voice whispers from the depths of Richie's worst memories, and he has to stare down at Eddie's hands and that *stupid fucking ring* just to keep from crying outright.

"What, me and Richie?" Eddie says, sounding nonplussed. Despite the earnest effort Richie makes to hold perfectly still, he jerks like he's just been slapped. He can practically *feel* everyone's eyes land on him, then, like he's a bug under a microscope, or a thirteen-year-old in a crowded arcade.

"It was just a thought," Ben says, startled and maybe even guilty, and Richie realizes with another jolt that he's starting to wheeze, breathing too quick and too loud in a room that's gone way too quiet.

He's being too obvious, he thinks in a panic. He needs to crack a joke, like, a solid *minute* of awkward silence ago—

"Dude, *breathe*," Eddie says to him, and when Richie looks up he sees his own body hovering just beside him, reaching out to touch but not quite making contact.

"Okay, so no need to try that," Beverly says from his other side, and Richie turns to look at her because it's easier than seeing Eddie frowning at him. "We didn't mean anything by it, Richie, it's just that if this whole thing *does* have something to do with the Deadlights, well..."

"Oh," Eddie says. "Because Ben kissed you awake, and that worked, right?"

"That m-makes sense," Bill says, sounding impressed.

Richie's stomach churns and twists so badly that he almost thinks he'll throw up – and in Eddie's body, no less. He's as afraid of waking up again to find that this was all a dream – that Eddie's still dead, bled out and left all alone with the fucking clown in the sewers – as he is of being trapped in this moment for even a second longer.

"No, it *doesn't*," Richie hisses. "You two love each other, okay, it's not the same."

He almost takes the words right back when he sees Beverly's expression shift from gentle concern to something his rattled mind reads as a dangerous kind of surprise.

But she isn't looking at him, or even at Ben, who Richie notes has gone very pink and dropped his own gaze to his lap. As if that alone wasn't enough to make Richie feel like an asshole, what he sees when he looks where Bev is looking definitely is.

His own face is such a perfect mirror of the hurt his words sent lancing through him that for a moment Richie forgets he's looking at *Eddie*.

"Right," Eddie says stiffly. "Yeah, you're right."

“Eds...”

Eddie shakes his head and forces a smile Richie could see through even with his eyes closed. “It’d be too weird kissing myself, anyway.”

Richie wants so badly to reach out and lace his and Eddie’s fingers together again, but he can’t do that. He’s not even on thin ice anymore; he’s got one leg in frigid water. He doesn’t dare give anyone a reason to send him plummeting any deeper than that, not even Eddie.

“It’d t-take like two s-seconds,” Bill says disbelievingly. “Th-the drug thing I g-get, but why *not* try that?”

“Bill,” Mike says, low and cautious, “I think maybe we should drop it.”

“Great idea,” Richie says immediately. He gives Mike an appreciative look he can only hope he won’t read too far into, and adds, “So, what, is that all anyone’s managed to come up with? What’s next, ‘sleeping it off’ part two?”

Ben opens his mouth, only to stop and close it again before he’s said a word. Richie raises an eyebrow at him, half-afraid of whatever he’d been about to suggest, and half-relieved to have found an opportunity to quickly and quietly establish that there are no hard feelings. Ben doesn’t know; Richie’s *glad* he doesn’t. It’s not his fault Richie’s got enough emotional baggage to put Eddie’s packing to shame.

“Okay, I swear this is a genuine suggestion and I’m not trying to be a jerk,” Ben says. He pauses again like he’s kind of hoping someone will tell him to can it; when no one does, he visibly steels himself before saying, “Do you think *maybe* sleeping it off would work better if you were actually touching? You were touching when you switched places.”

“Makes sense,” Bev says, making no secret of searching both their faces for signs of another bad reaction.

Richie risk a look at Eddie; their eyes meet, and whatever Eddie was searching for in Richie’s expression, he must find, because he nods

slowly and says, “That’s alright with me if it is with you.”

At this point, Richie’s just happy to agree to *anything* that isn’t explicitly romantic, so he says, “Wow, now I just wish these rooms had TVs. We could make it a regular slumber party.”

And that settles it. It gets an honest smile out of Eddie, which is maybe even more of a relief than everyone’s willingness to quietly drop Richie’s over-the-top reaction to the mere mention of a kiss. He still makes a point of smiling and joking with Ben and Bev in particular over the drinks they all share before heading up to bed; none of them have the energy reserves to draw the evening out for very much longer, but it’s still enough time to smooth over the rough patch, if not whatever suspicions Richie’s managed to arouse.

He doesn’t miss the way Bev and Mike both keep sneaking curious glances at him, and Bev doesn’t miss her chance to stop him in the hall outside the door to his room after everyone else has already retired to their respective rooms – or, in Mike’s case, to Bill’s. Richie supposes it’s no wonder Mike doesn’t want to go back to an apartment that’s one floor up from a crime scene where he nearly got stabbed to death. It’s reassuring, sort of, knowing he’s not the only one sharing a bed with a childhood friend tonight.

He has Eddie’s overnight bag slung over his shoulder, complete with the full assortment of toiletries Eddie unpacked for him a mere half a day ago, plus a fresh change of clothes for tomorrow. He’s already changed into pajamas, the better to avoid making this entire thing more awkward than it has to be.

“Hey,” Bev greets him with a careful smile that sets off alarm bells in Richie’s head.

“...Hey?”

“Easy, I just thought I’d say good night. And...”

Richie shifts his weight from foot to foot. He feels so light in Eddie’s body; he hopes he won’t have time to get used to that, one way or another. Maybe this thing has a twenty-four hour limit – wouldn’t *that* be nice.

“And?” he finally repeats.

Beverly sighs. “You’re probably getting tired of hearing this, but are you okay? Earlier, that was as much my idea as it was Ben’s. We’re both sorry for upsetting you.”

“I overreacted,” Richie says tightly. “You couldn’t’ve known.”

“Still,” Bev says.

“...You’re not gonna ask why?”

“Would you tell me?” Bev returns, almost challenging.

For a moment, the words balance on the tip of Richie’s tongue, but then he drops his gaze to the body he’s standing in, and the wrongness of it sends them tumbling back down his throat. He can’t, he thinks, and what if? What if Bev thinks Eddie deserves to know and tells him? What if he *does* deserve to know , and Richie’s being more of a creep by keeping it to himself?

“...Can’t,” he mutters. “Sorry.”

Bev smiles and offers him a hand. Richie takes it, nonplussed, and she surprises him by adjusting her grip so the ring on Eddie’s finger is front and center. Richie almost recoils, but Beverly just sighs, a little forlorn, and asks, “That’s fine, but can I give you a word of advice?”

Richie swallows. “About what?”

“You know,” Bev says. “This. It wouldn’t kill you to talk to him about it, would it?”

“The – his ring? Why would I”—?

“Because it bothers you,” she says, and leaves it at that.

Richie draws enough strength from the unspoken parts to say – whisper-quiet so he can be sure Eddie couldn’t possibly overhear – “Even if I took it off, he’d still be married. What fucking difference does it make?”

Bev gives him a sad smile. “So am I, technically.”

Richie thinks he might cry, then. He starts to say something, anyway – *But you'll make it work, you and Ben*, maybe, or *To a guy who never deserved you* – but she doesn't let him continue, just gives his hand a gentle squeeze and starts back down the hall toward a room he's pretty sure isn't hers, either.

“Good night, Richie,” she says, and Richie barely manages to echo the words back at her before Ben answers her knock and lets her slip through the door and into his open arms.

-*-

He and Richie are just finishing up getting ready for bed when Eddie remembers to ask him about his glasses. “Hey, Rich?” he calls, and without waiting for an answer, “Is there something specific I should be using to clean these?”

Richie appears in the doorway, a blurry form out of focus in the mirror.

“Yeah,” he says, just as subdued as he has been since he set foot in here. Eddie frowns and forgets to listen to Richie's next question.

“Hm?”

“...Can I come in?”

“Door's open,” Eddie says.

“Right,” Richie says uneasily, padding across the floor and holding something out to Eddie. “Here, this should help. But. Uhm. Don't worry about it too much. If we're still – if this doesn't help, we can see about getting a new pair in the morning. If you want.”

“You'll need them either way,” Eddie says, taking the soft cloth Richie hands him with a grateful nod.

“Yeah,” Richie agrees. “That’s one thing I don’t miss.”

“I never knew how good I had it,” Eddie says with a short laugh. He finishes cleaning Richie’s glasses and slips them on again. He folds the cloth and sets it on the edge of the sink before thinking better of it and passing it back to Richie. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Richie says. “So, are we staying up to do each other’s nails, too, or are you finally ready to call it a night?”

“You didn’t have to wait up for me,” Eddie huffs. “That’s why I let you go first.”

“Well, how else are we gonna rock-paper-scissors to decide who gets to be the big spoon?” Richie says with a bizarre amount of confidence for someone who then immediately looks like he wants to sink back into the floorboards. “Or not.”

Eddie thinks for a moment. “Me, I guess?”

Richie stares at him. “You’re serious?”

“Deadly,” Eddie says, and brushes past him to flick off the bathroom light. “But I’d wanna be the big spoon either way, so don’t get too cocky about it.”

“Either way, huh,” Richie mumbles, trailing after Eddie on his way to the bed. “Like... even if we weren’t...”

“Oh,” Eddie realizes. “Huh. I guess?”

Richie looks like he wants to say something else, but he doesn’t. Eddie really wishes he *would*, especially because he hasn’t stopped staring; Eddie ignores the nervous butterflies in his stomach and climbs under the covers ahead of Richie. He wiggles over to the left side of the bed, leaving Richie the side closest to the bedside table and only belatedly remembering that he kind of needs to set his glasses down over there.

“You wanna maybe get in bed and sleep at some point?”

Richie bites his lip and robotically climbs under the covers beside

Eddie, painstakingly avoiding making any actual contact with him in a bed that's almost too small for both of them to begin with.

"Breathe," Eddie reminds him again, because he's not sure what else to do.

"I'm – I'm breathing," Richie says, but now the way he's eyeing Eddie – or maybe not Eddie at all, maybe just his own body – is downright uneasy, and Eddie finally caves.

"Rich, what's wrong? Something *I'm* doing?"

Richie stiffens more; Eddie wouldn't have thought it possible.

"You're not doing anything wrong," Richie says, stressing the 'you're' like he thinks *someone* is. Eddie gets the distinct impression that the next words out of his mouth are just a diversion. "Y'know, I sorta thought you'd change something."

Eddie decides to bite, anyway. "About what?"

"Me," Richie says simply. He's finally lowered his gaze away from Eddie; it's fixed on his hands now. He's holding them up like a shield between himself and Eddie, but he doesn't seem to like what he sees. Eddie wishes that didn't make his heart ache, just like he wishes Richie reacting to the very thought of kissing him like it's something so bad it's *scary* hadn't cut him so far to the core that it *still* hurts.

"I wouldn't," he says, so forcefully that Richie's eyes widen a fraction. "I – why would I want to?"

"Well, *you're* so"—Richie struggles for a moment to find the right words, then shrugs and gestures down at himself in Eddie's body—"you know. Good-looking. Well-kempt?" he immediately corrects, looking chastened. "We'll go with that."

"Hey, I've been taking care of you just like I would my own body," Eddie says defensively. He's both confused and warmed by the compliment; it's hard not to show it. "Not that you don't take care of yourself, I mean. Obviously you – okay, why do I feel like this conversation's a trap?"

Richie blinks, then says with very little genuine humor in his tone, “You caught me, I’m just fishing for compliments.”

“You – that’s my point,” Eddie argues. “You don’t have to fish. You’re just as good-looking as – as me, I guess? At least *you* look good when you smile.”

Richie frowns at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Eddie realizes he’s slipped up too late. He could just do what Richie does, he thinks. Say it’s nothing or play it off as a joke. Slam the door between them and stop thinking about it until *maybe* it stops hurting.

But he doesn’t. He’s had just about enough of that.

He looks at his own face, at the worry lines and the easy way it wears a frown, and then he reaches across the sheets and wraps his hands up in Richie’s. He can so easily imagine Richie making the startled noise he does in the right voice – the one Eddie has to use when he starts to explain.

“I can’t get it right,” he says. “The way you smile. I spent like – like twenty minutes trying to copy you in the mirror, but your face isn’t the same without *you* behind it, and – uh, mine isn’t the same *with* you, and I think I kind of hated that at first, but the more I think about it, the more I... I don’t know, you make me look so...”

“Different?” Richie guesses, and this time he just looks... vulnerable. Scared, but present. Brave.

“Happy,” Eddie says. “You make me *feel* it, too. You – I mean, you always have, but.”

Richie swallows, but a choked-off sob still manages to slip past his lips. A few tears slip through, too, and he whispers, “Not as – not as happy as you make me.”

Eddie loosens his grip long enough to use a corner of the duvet to dab at the tears on his own cheeks. He watches as his eyes slip shut, and that makes it easier, almost, to keep talking. He sort of hopes Richie’s imagining them both in their own bodies, Eddie’s words in Eddie’s own voice and Eddie’s hands on his.

“Are you happy, Rich?”

Richie snorts softly – barely more than a quick exhalation. “Like right now?”

“No, dipshit, in general – you know, with. With your life?”

Richie sucks in a sharp breath and says, tightly, “I could be a lot worse.”

“...Does that also have to do with what you”—

“Saw in the Deadlights, yeah, yeah, when does it *not*,” Richie says, blinking his eyes open to look at Eddie. He’s stopped crying, but Eddie suspects one more well-timed comment would start it all over again.

“So are you or aren’t you,” Eddie presses.

“I don’t know? That’s kind of a big question, Eddie, why are you even”—

“Because I’m not,” Eddie blurts. “And I – I never even thought twice about it until this,” he gestures around them, meaning *Derry*, and at Richie, meaning *this. Us*. “But I think – I think I want to be done pretending not to feel things like. Like wanting things. *Really* wanting. I mean, obviously I *know* wanting isn’t the same as having, and you – you might not want *me*, but I at least. Fuck, I want you to be the first person I tell.”

Richie doesn’t look like he even tries to hold back the next sob that runs through him like a current. “I’ve loved you basically my entire life,” he chokes. “So what, you’d still want me around? You want a fucking f”—

“*Don’t* finish that sentence,” Eddie says. “Yes, I fucking want you around, holy shit, Richie, I’m trying to tell you it’s – oh, wow, it’s mutual.” He feels giddy, like he used to when they were kids enjoying all the highs of long, hot summers. He never wants this to end.

Richie blinks, a little guarded, and says, “Eds, I swear to god if you’re

joking about this”—

“I’m fucking in love with you,” Eddie says, moving in closer to Richie and interlacing their fingers. “But sure, ask me if I’m joking about coming out to you, you jerk.”

Richie draws a long, shaky breath and still sounds a little breathless when he says, “God, I want to hear you say that in your own voice.”

“And I want to see that smile on *your* face,” Eddie says, “but for now I’ll settle for a kiss.”

Richie smiles nervously, and Eddie waits with his hands slipping up to rest on his shoulders. “So – so you don’t mind kissing yourself, then?”

Eddie wrinkles his nose. “Don’t remind me. I’m hoping if we close our eyes, I can just pretend it’s... oh, hang on,” he murmurs, dropping his hands back to Richie’s – to the ring on his finger, which seems to startle Richie at least as much as anything else Eddie’s done in the past several minutes.

“I’m sorry,” he breathes. He doesn’t look like he knows why he says it, any more than Eddie does.

“I’m not,” Eddie says, and slips the ring off in one smooth motion.

He tosses it to the side, careless in a way he’s so *rarely* let himself be, and then he feels slender hands cup his face as his eyes flutter closed, and Richie kisses him with a short, airy little laugh that Eddie *devours*, like it’s air and he’s finally coming up for it after years of slow suffocation. Like it’s the easiest thing in the world, just letting himself feel something so simple, and for a long, delicate moment, the pure joy of it fills him so completely that he hardly notices the way time seems to freeze around them. Who could blame him for not noticing the extra current of energy that fills an already electric kiss?

The last thing he hears before losing consciousness is the clatter of his ring dropping to the floor, and Richie gasping open-mouthed against him.

When Richie opens his eyes and sees the dank, crumpled-aluminum rock walls and massive boulders of the cistern, he's so caught up in the immediate horror of it that the change in lighting takes another moment to dawn on him. There's no more harsh, flickering blue or green light and no more of the long, dark shadows he associates with this place; instead, he finds himself surrounded by a warm amber light that seems to soften all the sharp lines.

It's exactly the kind of light that would make blood stand out like red ink on exam papers, but there's none of that, either. In fact, the only splash of color Richie finds, he sees when he looks up at a cloudless blue sky. If he listens closely, he can almost hear birds chirping outside.

Outside?

Richie tries to call Eddie's name, because he has to be here. He's here every time, and Richie has to be ready.

His voice comes out gruffer than expected, sleep-rough and muffled and very unlike Eddie's, but he gets an answer all the same in the form of a similarly low and muted groan that vibrates against the back of Richie's shoulder.

He jumps a little and finds himself anchored by a weight around his waist and a solid pressure against his back. A warm, moist breath gusts across the back of his neck, and Richie's eyes flutter open for real this time.

"Oh," he mumbles at the very obviously *not* rock walls of a room at the townhouse. His glasses are askew on his face, but he doesn't get quite as far as reaching up to adjust them, because that would mean letting go of Eddie's hand.

Eddie's hand, which is pressed against Richie's bare stomach, just below the hem of his shirt, which apparently managed to ride up at some point in the middle of the night. Eddie's arm, draped over

Richie's body, Eddie's chest snug and warm against Richie's back, and Eddie's face pressed into the dip between Richie's throat and his shoulder.

Oh, *shit*.

Heart hammering, Richie rolls over as carefully as he possibly can. It means adjusting Eddie's position, too, gingerly lifting his arm and awkwardly supporting his head so he doesn't just unceremoniously dump him back onto the pillows.

And sure enough, it's Eddie, in Eddie's body, his chest rising and falling at regular intervals and the tiniest smile playing on his lips.

All Richie can do for several moments is stare in quiet awe at the way the sunlight filtering into his room lends Eddie a positively angelic glow. It makes him look safe and peaceful and *alive*, and when Richie finally makes up his mind to move, his first impulse is to snap a picture with his phone – fortunately, the first one he manages to connect with when he reaches back to the bedside table.

The shutter makes a soft *click* that still manages to put a perturbed frown on Eddie's face.

Cute, Richie thinks, and takes another.

"...Taking pictures of me?" Eddie mumbles, opening his eyes just enough to give Richie a halfhearted glare.

"...No," Richie says in the guiltiest voice possible.

A moment later, Eddie's eyes widen, and he scrambles upright.

"Holy shit. You're... *you*. Did it work?"

Richie follows suit with a shit-eating grin on his face. "Nah, we're both me. Good luck explaining *that* one to your Mrs. K."

Eddie grins and gives Richie's shoulder a gentle punch. "Somehow I think she'd take that better than the D-word."

"Dick?" Richie guesses, trying not to look too relieved that Eddie

hasn't taken the reminder as a cue to come to his senses and fly out of the bed. His bed? Theirs?

"Hilarious," Eddie deadpans. "Hey, can I see those?"

Richie casts a sheepish look at the phone in his hand. "Uh. I can delete them if you want."

"If they look bad then yeah," Eddie huffs, making a grab for the phone. Richie doesn't even try to dodge.

Eddie scrolls for a moment while Richie watches him with bated breath.

After a moment, he blinks and murmurs a quietly surprised, "Huh."

"What?"

Instead of answering him, Eddie just turns the phone back around so Richie can see the screen.

Of course it's the picture from yesterday, the one of him in Eddie's body, his hair still damp from a shower and his expression soft. Even in the bad light of the bathroom and with dark bags under his eyes, Eddie looks beautiful to Richie. He looks beautiful now, too, with his hair sticking up at odd angles and the vague imprint of the bedsheets still pressed into his uninjured cheek.

"...Sorry," Richie breathes, scared in spite of himself. "I shouldn't have"—

"No, no, it's okay," Eddie says. The hand he brings up to Richie's cheek sends a sudden thrill through him. "Uh, it's just – remember what I said about practicing your smile?"

"Staring at this mug in the mirror for an hour for science," Richie says, eager to lighten the mood. "Yep, I remember."

"It wasn't an *hour!*" Eddie splutters, pulling his hand back to brandish it at Richie. "It was – no, never mind, forget it."

"Eds," Richie whines theatrically. "Okay, it was only *half* an hour.

Come on, what were you gonna say?"

Eddie sighs and shoves the phone at Richie again. "This. I didn't take a picture because I'm not a giant sap like *you*"—

"Hey!"

—"but I did, uh. Kinda get to see your face look a lot like this. It's kind of uncanny, actually, I was thinking"—

"About me?" Richie says hopefully.

"...Yep," Eddie says, popping his lips on the 'p.'

Richie *melts*, and after a mostly unintelligible attempt to say something to the effect of 'so was I,' he gives up and grins and whispers, "*Sap*."

"Oh, there it is again," Eddie says, a little shy. This time when he raises a hand to cup Richie's cheek, his intent is clear.

"Better make sure we're not gonna switch back and forth every time we do this, huh?" Richie says, instantly nervous. Nervous and *eager*.

Eddie rolls his eyes and leans in. "Are you gonna talk through every kiss we have?"

"Maybe if you"— but he doesn't get to finish his sentence, because Eddie kisses the words right out of his head. He kisses him slowly, leisurely, and Richie's head spins to balance it out.

When they finally break away, Eddie's eyes are shining, his lips are quirking up into an awestruck, lovestruck little smile, and it's a million times better than any picture Richie could've taken alone in a torn-up bathroom.

"So does this mean I don't have to delete them?" Richie wonders. Fuck, he's gonna dedicate an entire album to dozens more. He's gonna have to get a phone with enough storage to hold thousands, and even then it'll never measure up to getting to see Eddie every day, in the flesh, just like this.

Eddie presses a second kiss to the corner of Richie's mouth.

"Yeah," he says, "as long as I can get a couple hundred more of you."

Author's Note:

Whew! This fic took me longer to finish than I expected - if I'm not mistaken, exactly two weeks since I finished my ghost fic! - but hopefully my first ever crack at a body swap fic made for a pleasant read! It got... much longer than I thought it would, but I had already decided to post it all as one chapter and so by god I was going to!

Next stop - apocalypse AU / fix-it in which, spoiler alert? I will finally also un-kill good ol' Stan the Man, sorry Stan.